

Waves of Atrocity and Embers of Memory: A Discussion of the “Comfort Women” Issue in Context

Inspired Writings:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

George Santayana

The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense, 1905

Memory is preventative. The closer you are to an event, the more conscious it makes you of the possibility it might ever occur again. You put your all into preventing another from experiencing such a fate. It's the same principle that taught us fire burns. The embers of memory may dim until suddenly someone is scalded by the return of roaring flames.

A problem arises when we consider the intersection of history and memory. Humanity is limited in its perspective. When an atrocity occurs, it leaves a wave of impacts, but with time, those impacts begin to fade. People forget how tall those waves might've been in the first place. Once those ripples subside, we find ourselves in the same place asking the same questions.

Introduction:

Japanese wartime sexual slavery victims, known euphemistically as “comfort women”, suffered unspeakable wrongdoings during World War II. These women, often children at the time, were subjected to continual rape, physical assaults, psychological abuse, and other atrociously inhumane conditions. Many were left damaged, both physically and mentally, by what they endured during the war. The human trafficking that fed this system is presumed to be one of the largest government-sponsored cases in history.¹ The issue began to come to light in the early 1990s, when Kim Hak-sun first spoke of her experience and later filed a lawsuit at the Tokyo District Court in response to denialism by Japan.²

¹ Bisland, Beverly Milner (Lee), et al. “Teaching about the Comfort Women during World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims.” *Association for Asian Studies*, The Association for Asian Studies, 2019, www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/teaching-about-the-comfort-women-during-world-war-ii-and-the-use-of-personal-stories-of-the-victims/.

² Asian Women's Fund. “How Did the Comfort Women Issue Come to Light?” www.awf.or.jp, 2007, www.awf.or.jp/e2/survey.html.

Historical Context:

Conflict had raged through Asia in the years before the Second World War began in Europe as Japan sought to grow its influence and holdings throughout the region. The Fifteen Year War began in 1931 with the Mukden Incident in Manchuria.³ It would morph into the Second Sino-Japanese War, which would merge with the Pacific War as World War II grew into a global conflict. Korea, which had become a Japanese protectorate in 1905⁴ while still functioning as the Korean Empire, was annexed by Japan in 1910.⁵ After which, it became a colony of Japan and remained so until 1945. Japan used its colonial power in Korea to drain the country of its resources while using its population to their whim.

The “comfort women” were an important part of Japan’s operational policy as they grew to control large parts of China and southeast Asia. Outrage after the Rape of Nanking⁶ within China and disbelief at the conduct of Japan internationally meant a partial shift from the brutal “Three Alls” policy.⁷ By bringing in large groups of young girls from across Asia, Japan attempted to calm discontent in occupied territories and minimized local rapes by their soldiers. They did so at the cost of anywhere from 20,000 to 500,000 women and girls.⁸ Wartime Japan’s policies treated women as a means to an end to maintain troop morale and commodities that could be used and abused without remorse. Today, that lack of remorse remains.

Japanese Policy:

³ Tsutsui, William M. “The Fifteen-Year War.” *A Companion to Japanese History* /, Blackwell Pub., 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751398>.

⁴ National Museum of Korea. “Medieval and Early Modern History.” *National Museum of Korea*, National Museum of Korea, www.museum.go.kr/site/eng/showroom/list/759?showroomCode=DM0041. Accessed 18 July 2024.

⁵ Weatherhead East Asian Institute. “Key Points | Asia for Educators | Columbia University.” *Afe.easia.columbia.edu*, Columbia University, afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1900-1950.htm.

⁶ USC Shoah Foundation. “Nanjing Massacre.” *USC Shoah Foundation*, University of Southern California, 2023, sfi.usc.edu/collections/nanjing-massacre.

⁷ Fairbank, John King, and Merle Goldman. *China: A New History, Second Enlarged Edition*. Harvard University Press, 2006. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghv1z>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2024.

⁸ Dudden, Alexis. “A Guide to Understanding the History of the “Comfort Women” Issue.” *United States Institute of Peace*, United States Institute of Peace, 16 Sept. 2022, www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue. Accessed 18 July 2024.

Statements made by Japan and its officials have differed considerably since the first testimony by Kim in 1991. After considerable research, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released the Kono Statement in 1993.⁹ In it, the Government of Japan admitted to moving women “generally against their will” and subjecting them to grave abuses. In the statement, a clear level of moral accountability is established, (1) in the descriptions of wrongdoing and clarity of who committed them (“military authorities”) and (2) the wording choices in the below sentences.

“The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”

“We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.”

Although Japan went on to establish the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995 following the Murayama Statement¹⁰, many victims were displeased with its structure and called rather for state redress. Although it was publicly run, it relied partially on private donations and leadership.¹¹ Therefore, its actions did not represent those of the government entity of Japan, but rather private citizenry. As time passed, vocal efforts to better the issue from Japanese officials lessened and the AWF was dissolved in 2007.¹² That year happened to make up a majority of

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 4 Aug. 1993, www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the Occasion of the Establishment of the “Asian Women’s Fund.”” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 1 July 1995, www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000354.html.

¹¹ Haruki, Wada. “The Comfort Women, the Asian Women’s Fund and the Digital Museum - the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, The Asia-Pacific Journal, Feb. 2008, apjjf.org/wada-haruki/2653/article.

¹² Asian Women's Fund. “Closing of the Asian Women’s Fund.” *Www.awf.or.jp*, Asian Women’s Fund, 2007, www.awf.or.jp/e3/dissolution.html.

Shinzo Abe's first term as Prime Minister. His leadership would set a new tone domestically regarding the subject and raise tensions between South Korea and Japan (among others).

Abe was known in particular for being a revisionist of Japanese actions during the Fifteen Years War.¹³ Over his four terms as PM (separated from first), he made multiple statements referring to the “comfort women” issue and presided over the signing of the 2015 Comfort Women agreement with South Korea.¹⁴ The agreement would deteriorate when it was reviewed by the Moon Jae-in administration and found to have not considered the wishes of survivors or public opinion. Although he acknowledged Japan's colonization of Asia and the suffering of “comfort women”, Abe's comments regarding the topic are remarkably tone-deaf. Remarks from 2013 are as follows, “My position is that this issue should not be politicized or be turned into a diplomatic issue”, and “Throughout history, women's dignity and basic human rights have often been infringed upon during the many wars of the past.”¹⁵ These statements weigh heavily on the conscience. Should the suffering of women be avoided in the political and diplomatic spheres simply because it's happened before? To rationalize his words would set a dangerous precedent to view the plights of used women throughout history and into the future.

Post-war Circumstance and Prostitution:

This issue is equally as personal as it is political or diplomatic. Raised in the traditional Confucian environments of their youth, “comfort women” for years were too ashamed to tell their stories publicly.¹⁶ With the growth of democracy and feminism in the late 1980s, these women felt more empowered to tell their stories and command their strength to bring awareness

¹³ Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. “Japan and the Art of Un-Apologising | East Asia Forum.” *East Asia Forum*, 16 July 2014, eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/16/japan-and-the-art-of-un-apologising/.

¹⁴ Hosaka, Yuji. “Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea “Comfort Women” Agreement Fall Apart?” *The Diplomat*, Diplomat Media Inc., 18 Nov. 2021, thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart/.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “The Points of Remarks by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 15 May 2013, www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page3e_000119.html.

¹⁶ Seth, Michael J. “2. A Confucian Society.” *Korea: A Very Short Introduction*, 23 Jan. 2020, pp. 27–46. *Oxford Academic*, academic.oup.com/book/28408/chapter-abstract/228829365?redirectedFrom=fulltext, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198830771.003.0003>.

to atrocities committed in wartime.¹⁷ Before that time, their experiences were more than their own, entrenched in layers of national shame and post-colonial trauma as Korea sought to recover from Japan. The Korean War further complicated their positions. Loss of life was great and those surviving on were typically unsupported and vulnerable.¹⁸ As the United States remained stationed in South Korea, the areas near military bases began to cater to their residents. Sex work boomed and was even facilitated by the South Korean government.¹⁹ Reeling from the economic impacts of the Korean War, South Korea depended financially on the money made through prostitution to US soldiers.²⁰ It has been estimated that at its peak, prostitution in these camptowns accounted for approximately 25% of the gross national product. A number of “comfort women” found their only option to again service soldiers. Many women were encouraged by government and local officials to contribute to the servicing of US soldiers. Equally so, the Park Chung-Hee regime built facilities and organized STD testing for prostitutes to keep the system running.²¹ While in Dongducheon, I was shown one of these abandoned centers and told of the conditions endured by local sex workers.

Camptowns were dangerous. Walking through the city, quiet as it is today, felt like an antithesis to history. Prostitutes regularly went missing, were assaulted, or trapped in the job with little way out. In Sangpae-dong, on the edge of the city limit, the hills are scattered with unmarked graves. I was told by the local guide that those buried there may number over 2000. Having



¹⁷ Lee, Na-Young. “Special Feature: The Korean Women’s Movement of Japanese Military “Comfort Women”: Navigating between Nationalism and Feminism.” *The Review of Korean Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2014, pp. 71–92, accesson.kr/rks/assets/pdf/7761/journal-17-1-71.pdf.

¹⁸ National Army Museum. “Korean War | National Army Museum.” *Nam.ac.uk*, The National Army Museum, 2017, www.nam.ac.uk/explore/korean-war.

¹⁹ Szpargala, Katarzyna. “The U.S. Troops and Military Prostitution in South Korea – Conflict, Justice, Decolonization.” *Conflict, Justice, Decolonization: Asia in Transition in the 21st Century*, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, 2020, cjdproject.web.nycu.edu.tw/2020/01/10/the-u-s-troops-and-military-prostitution-in-south-korea/.

²⁰ Korea JoongAng Daily. “Former Sex Workers in Fight for Compensation.” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Korea JoongAng Daily, 30 Oct. 2008, koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2896741.

²¹ Hwang, Taejin. ““Re-Membering” South Korea’s Militarized Landscapes in Pax Americana: Post-Cold War US Military Camps, Camptowns, and Former Camptown Women.” *International Journal of Korean History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 31 Aug. 2023, pp. 181–218, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2023.28.2.181>.

looked through Naver and Chrome in both English and Korean, there appears to be no digital footprint for the site. These women, majority unidentified, have fallen through the cracks of history. It is an unpleasant comparison to make to the “comfort women” issue, which has been championed by many globally.

Honor Victims and Their Choices:

While in South Korea, I had the honor of meeting Grandma Yong-soo Lee. In Daegu on that very hot day, Grandma Lee received us at a favorite restaurant of hers. It was a simple exchange. She kindly encouraged us to eat our fill and chatted with us. We traveled to the Daegu Citizen’s Forum for Grandmas, where Grandma Lee met with us and a member of the Korean Assembly. I vividly recall her impassioned speech to the assembly person although I could not understand it all. We talked little of her experiences, though I had already read of them, as she said the day was not a good one. She would leave to attend a funeral and return later that day to meet us near Dongdaegu Station. Grandma Lee seemed enveloped by a combination of lingering sadness and disappointment. She also seemed rather annoyed, not at us, but at others. She shared with us her recent dream, where another grandma came to her telling her to be done and to live the rest of her life without stress. It reminded me of an article I’d read of her discussing her disillusionment with the organization meant to aid victims. Related to the 2015 Korea-Japan Agreement, Yoon Mi-Hyang, the former head of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, was accused by Grandma Lee of leaving victims in the dark and further questioned on where the organization’s money had been used. Yoon in return, questioned Grandma Lee’s memory and denied the allegations.²² The day I spent with her led me to think of her as competent and clear in her will to participate or step away from activism. It is ultimately her choice to decide how her story is told, and how much more she is willing to do even after 30 years of protests. A victim is entitled to a voice, and perhaps her own has grown weary.

²² Korea JoongAng Daily. ““Comfort Woman” Survivor Says She Won’t Be Used Anymore.” *Koreajoongangdaily.joins.com*, Korea JoongAng Daily, 14 May 2020, koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/05/14/socialAffairs/comfort-women-japan-Lee-Yongsoo/20200514193400307.html.

Conclusion:

By differing parties and across time, women have been exploited. The trip to Dongducheon proved that undoubtedly. Grandma Lee's experiences proved it once again. We cannot let atrocities like these lapse in our collective memory. Japan's changed stances over the last three decades have not gone unnoticed. The government's inconsistency to live up to its stated promises will continue to bolster ill will between Korea and Japan, hurting a needed partnership between the two amongst rising tensions in East Asia. These women are more than pawns in politics, but real people who have gone through tremendous hardship time and time again to share their stories. We must allow them the recognition they deserve for their efforts and continue to work for an honest acknowledgement of the crimes committed by Japan.